



Coast Guard Flag Voice 40

MINORITY WOMEN IN THE COAST GUARD

At the recent Diversity Summit, we conducted a panel to specifically address issues on minority women officers' progress, or lack thereof. This was an outgrowth of the issue brought to the Commandant's attention at last year's National Naval Officers Association (NNOA) Conference. The panel, facilitated by LCDR Sharon Donald-Baynes, was an exceptional group who did a remarkable job addressing the issue "Is There a Glass Ceiling for Minority Women Officers?" Members were CDR Manson Brown, CDR Melissa Wall, LCDR Rhonda Gadsden, LT Julia Diaz-Rex, and Dr. Judith Youngman, Associate Professor of Political Science at the Coast Guard Academy and former West Point Associate Professor. Especially as a former member and Chair of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Service (DACOWITS) and other prestigious Department of Defense (DoD) councils, panels, and committees, Dr. Youngman has substantial experience advising the highest levels in our government on women's military issues. I thought her opening remarks particularly noteworthy; here they are (slightly edited):

The four Department of Defense armed services are outperforming the USCG in the representation of minority women throughout their ranks. In all but the Marine Corps (where 30 percent of positions are closed to women), the DoD services also are outpacing the USCG in the representation of women overall in the services. The data alone, however, do not present the total picture. Minority women officers have assumed significant leadership roles in the other armed services. The first woman to command an Army base was African American, as was an Air Force Major General who headed the NATO women's forces committee. One of the first five women commanding officers of a naval combatant ship is a minority woman. A soon to be released DoD study of the attrition of first-term service members shows white women have significantly **HIGHER** attrition rates than women of color in DoD services. While minority women officers leave the DoD services at higher rates than their enlisted counterparts, their attrition rates are lower than the Coast Guard's.

Given the differences between the Coast Guard and the other services in recruiting and retaining minority women, it is time for the Coast Guard to look inward for reasons for our minority women recruitment and retention difficulties. Clearly, minority women have an interest in military service. It also may be time to explore what we can learn from the other services, as well as from the private sector, to increase the representation of minority women, and especially officers, in the Coast Guard.

What I have learned from my work in the Department of Defense and my academic research on civilian labor markets is this: from DACOWITS and DoD I learned minority women who leave the military cite the same reasons across all services. The service is not what they expected. Military service conflicts with demands and responsibilities of their personal lives. They perceive better opportunities in the civilian sector. But the number one reason consistently raised is military women often do not feel valued

within their service and the units within which they serve. They perceive themselves as "marginalized" rather than a valued team member.

When discussing their perceptions of not being valued and marginalization, minority women do not appear to want special or preferential treatment. Nor do they appear to have "unrealistic expectations" given their services' missions and values. Rather, they describe marginalization as being excluded from discussions and team efforts; not having their opinions sought when their peers' are; the lack of meaningful work assignments and career-enhancing work opportunities and experiences; not being "looked in the eye" by seniors and peers; being treated disrespectfully in public and private by seniors and peers; and the lack of mentoring and guidance. Most frequently, minority women officers perceive they are NOT treated as an individual, but as a stereotype of "a person who looks like me."

These minority women officers' perceptions are identical to reasons cited by private-sector executives and professionals who change employers. As one example, a recent study conducted by Kepner-Tregoe, an international management consulting firm located in Princeton, NJ, identified a "gap" between why employees said they sought other employment and the reasons why senior executives thought employees left. The study concluded, "Senior executives are sadly misinformed about what it takes to keep their troops loyal." Of the top three reasons identified for employee attrition, senior executives most frequently cited salary and financial incentives, work schedules, day care availability, and job "perks." Employees, however, disagreed. While compensation was one of the decisive factors, the other top reasons for resigning were perceptions of limited opportunities for advancement; not feeling valued within their organization; and a conflict with supervisors.

What does this study show? It shows minority women officers leave the armed services for the same reasons cited by civilian employees who change jobs. And this conclusion is what I have learned, seen, and been told by our minority women officers during my seven years with the Coast Guard, as well as by women officers from all the armed services.

They resign from the service because the "intangibles" were not there--being valued as a contributing member of the organization and the service.

How do we proceed to address these "intangibles" for minority women officers within the Coast Guard? I believe the responsibility lies with each one of us in this room--not only with our leaders or Headquarters. They can change salaries and make policies. But the answer lies in our own hearts and conscience. We must ask ourselves: "Do I treat minority women officers as part of Team Coast Guard? If I see a minority women officer struggling, do I reach out a helping hand and provide support? Do I reach out to include minority officers when they appear isolated or excluded? Do I encourage and support, or do I ignore?"

In conclusion, the key to retaining minority women officers in the Coast Guard lies with each of us. We have yet to admit to ourselves as a Service what they already know. These bright, smart, articulate, educated minority women officers don't need us--the civilian sector will welcome them with open arms.

WE need them, and especially to meet the needs of Coast Guard 2020.

Very well said, Dr. Youngman!

As noted in my Flag Voice summary of the Diversity Summit, we will establish a working group to focus on minority women's recruitment and retention. As Dr. Youngman aptly stated, the real "solutions" to retaining our good people don't lie here in Washington, but, in the words of a popular TV show, "The truth is out there." What are we doing throughout the Coast Guard to ensure all our people feel valued? Often it's the "little" things that count. For instance, if you have a Coast Guard Exchange, does it carry products for minority women? As one panelist remarked, this might sound like an insignificant issue, but taking care of some of the basic needs shows an individual is valued. Feeling not valued soon results in isolation and often leads to "failure," which shouldn't be surprising. As a supervisor, are you stepping up to the plate? Talking with your people and learning what they need will go a long way in making this a better place for all.

Regards, FL Ames



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